

The Influence of Romantic Attachment and Intimate Partner Violence on Non-Suicidal Self-Injury Behavior among College Students

Eliana Silva¹, Sónia Gonçalves¹, Bárbara C. Machado², and Vânia Lima²
¹ School of Psychology, University of Minho, Portugal,
² Portuguese Catholic University, Porto, Portugal
 (Contact: sgoncalves@psi.uminho.pt)



INTRODUCTION

- Non-suicidal Self-injury Behavior (NSSI) is defined by the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue resulting in immediate damage, without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned (*International Network for the Study of Self-Injury*, 2007)
- Estimates of the prevalence of self-injury among college students range between 12%-38% (Gratz, Conrad, & Roemer 2002; Heath, Toste, Nedecheva, & Charlebois, 2008)
- Romantic relationships and self-injury are two significant issues that can influence college students' functioning. Previous researchers have studied these issues as separate phenomena, but recent studies have demonstrated that intimate partner violence and insecure attachment serve as environmental risk factors for the development of NSSI (Levesque, Lafontaine, Bureau, & Dandurand, 2010; Murray, Wester, & Paladino, 2008) and that emotion dysregulation, possibly caused by these environmental stressors, is a consistent individual risk factor (Heath et al., 2008)

AIMS

- This study aimed to evaluate the impact of romantic relationships and emotional regulation on non-suicidal self-injury in a community sample of young adults college students ($N = 616$).

METHOD

Participants:

- A total of 616 subjects (71.8% female), aged between 18 to 35 years old (20.28 , $SD = 3.0$) participated in the current study.

- Three hundred and fourteen (50.97%) of the participants were involved in a romantic relationship, average duration was 27.62 months ($SD = 29.23$).

Instruments :

- Socio-Demographic and Clinical Questionnaire:** has a small amount of items that allows data collection concerning, i.e. sex, age, the presence of self-injurious thoughts and suicide attempt.
- Self-injurious Questionnaire Treatment Related (SIQ-TR) (Claes & Vandereycken, 2007):** assesses the taxonomic specifications of self-injurious behavior (e.g., type, frequency, duration), the affective antecedents and consequences and the functions of each behavior.

- Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004):** is a 36-item measure which assesses six dimensions of emotion regulation: nonacceptance of emotions (Non-Acceptance), difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior (Goals), impulse control difficulties (Impulse), lack of emotional awareness (Awareness), limited access to emotion regulation strategies (Strategies), lack of emotional clarity (Clarity).

- The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (ERI) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998):** is a 36-item questionnaire that measures the four attachment styles: secure, fearful, dismissing and preoccupied (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998) and two dimensions of romantic attachment: anxiety over abandonment and avoidance of intimacy.

- The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996):** is a 78-item measure of intimate partner violence that includes five subscales: physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence, negotiation, and physical injury. Each subscale measures both experienced and perpetrated violence through items addressed to the participant and items addressed to the participant's partner.

RESULTS

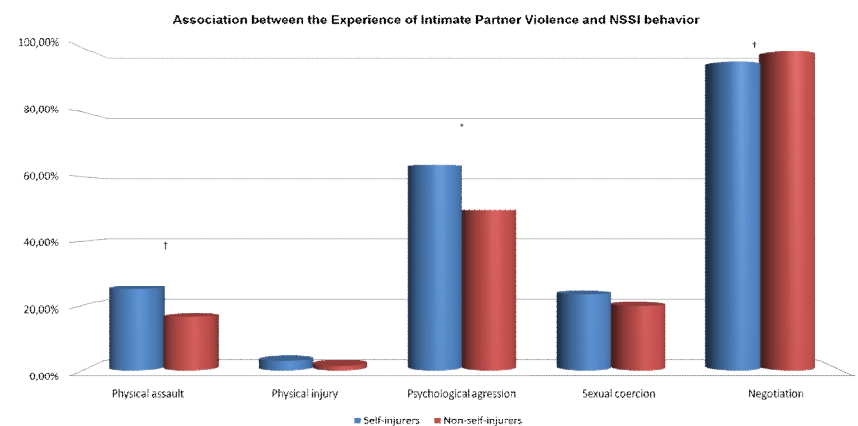
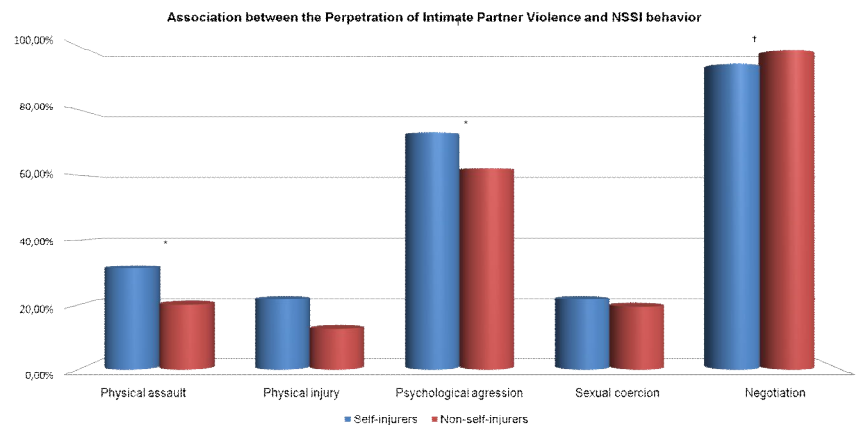
Prevalence of NSSI behavior, NSSI thoughts and suicide attempts

- Ninety four subjects (15.3%) reported having injured themselves in some moment of their lives and 9.7% ($n=60$) reported non-suicidal self-injury thoughts. With regard to suicide attempts, 3.9% ($n=24$) of participants reported at least a suicide attempt.

Association between NSSI behavior and romantic attachment

- In order to evaluate possible association between self-injurious behavior and attachment styles, we performed chi-square test. An association was found between self-injurious behavior and attachment style, $\chi^2(1) = 5.05$, $p < .05$. While the majority (52.6%) of non-self-injurers presents a secure attachment style, the majority (61.0%) of self-injurers presents insecure styles.

Association between the perpetration and experience of intimate partner violence and NSSI behavior



Differences in reports of emotion regulation difficulties between self-injurers and non-self-injurers

- Significant differences were found between self-injurers and non-self-injurers on emotion regulation difficulties. Self-injurers having scored higher on all emotional dysregulation subscales: non-acceptance ($p < .05$), goals ($p < .05$), impulse ($p < .001$), awareness ($p < .10$), strategies ($p < .01$) and clarity ($p < .01$).

Predictors of NSSI behavior

- One logistic regression were conducted in order to determine the relative influence of romantic attachment, intimate partner violence and emotion regulation difficulties. The model we tested proved to be statistically significant $\chi^2(13) = 24.90$, $p < .05$, allowing correctly classify 85.6% of cases. Impulse control difficulties emerged as a marginally significant predictor of non-suicidal self-injury ($B = .07$, $Wald = 2.73$, $p < .10$). Individuals with impulse control difficulties tend to be more likely to report NSSI behavior.

DISCUSSION:

This study increases the depth of knowledge about non-suicidal self-injury behavior in college students and highlights the importance of romantic relationships in the development of risk taking behaviors. The association between non-suicidal self-injury and insecure attachment styles and the association between the experience and perpetration of abusive behavior and non-suicidal self-injury, emphasize the value of evaluating intimate relationship functioning in the process of determining indicators of presence or absence of NSSI in young adults. Finally, the difficulties in emotion regulation reported by the participants who engaged in NSSI are important. Emotion regulation appears to be central to the occurrence of this behavior.